

**Other People's Heroes:**  
**Intertexts, History, and Comparative Resistance to Totalization**

Gregory B. Lee

Lyons University– Université de Lyon (Jean Moulin)  
IETT, 13 rue Bancel, 69007 LYON, France

Abstract:

Given the remit of addressing the potential of “worlded” comparative literature, I raise here two principal questions. First, the importance of history in reading intertexts, or the historicity of the reception of texts (a reception which is often shielded by a penumbra of ignorance from those for whom the text was “intended” or from those who are the object of interest of a particular text), for in the shade of parallel but distinct trajectories of history yet further meaning is produced. Texts discussed include the poetry of Byron in the context of its reception in China, the Chinese ballad *Mulan*, and its *détournement* by Disney. The second reflection is on the nature of the impact of the “global” on literary and cultural studies, and on the meaning of global or world cultural production; a consideration of this seemingly new “worldly” culture also obliging us to invoke the historicity of this concept. In discussing these two areas, I tangentially seek to broach my discomfort with the metaphors with which we imagine and write literary and cultural studies.

Bio-profile

Gregory B. Lee is First Vice President of Jean Moulin University (Université de Lyon), Professor of Chinese and Transcultural Studies, and Director of the Institute for Transtextual and Transcultural Studies ([www.iett.eu](http://www.iett.eu)) at Jean Moulin University, Lyons. He previously taught Chinese and comparative literary studies at the universities of Chicago and Hong Kong. His research focuses on transnational and diasporic cultures and cultural history. His publications include *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (Duke UP, 1996) and *Chinas Unlimited: Making the Imaginaries of China and Chineseness* (Hawai'i; Routledge, 2003). He is also editor of the recently launched tri-lingual (English, Chinese, French) journal *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* ([www.transtexts.net](http://www.transtexts.net)).

*Comme nous donnons notre attention à un objet nous pouvons le donner à deux à la fois.... La comparaison n'est donc qu'une double attention.*

Condillac, *Logique*, I,7.

Except in France, where I write this article and where the discipline remains firmly anchored in the comparison of European high literatures and where incidentally the popularity of Derrida and Foucault remains quite relative, comparative literary studies at the end of the twentieth-century evolved in multiple and overlapping ways, sometimes sheltering behind the mantle of CompLit and sometimes brazenly shedding its mask. In a positive sense, comparative literature has enabled

post-modern theorizing, the development of cultural studies, the inclusion of film studies in what was once a purely literary domain, and the writing of comparative cultural histories. It could be argued that comparative literature has ceded its place to a more generous schema of “global literary studies”. On the level of tolerance and openness, global literary studies gives, at least, the chance to study and discuss marginal and “hybrid” literatures.<sup>1</sup>

However, within the framework of the “global” (and in French there is a nice distinction between *global* in the sense of “general”, and *mondial* relating to the totality of the earth, leading to the English globalization being translated as *mondialisation*) it would be a mistake to lose sight of the specificity and possibility for difference afforded by the comparative, for the comparative resists totalization. The Greek *eikon* (translated *similitude* in Latin) underlines the difference between metaphor and simile. Eikon, or image, what is similar, the simile, the *likeness*, was for Quintillius, explained by *comparatio*, what happens in a simile, the difference emerging from the parallel, the parallel-difference. Thus, similitude/simile maintains the difference, the *like* prevents total assimilation, while it may be argued the global-globality (the general, generalized) tends to efface it.

Given this caveat, the notion of a possible “worlded” comparative literature makes possible several vectors for enquiry. I am particularly attracted by the fact that the editors of this special issue of *Gramma* have privileged both the “pathways it has opened up and the ones it has foreclosed or left unexplored”. For me these pathways are crossed, interweaved and superimposed. The importance of the past, and ways of remembering and telling it are central to

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<sup>1</sup> One of the paradoxes of French intellectual life, anchored as it is in a hegemonic, centralized education system, is that while much of the theory used in this domain emanates from French intellectuals (Castoriadis, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida – all considered as philosophers in France albeit largely excluded from philosophy syllabi) its impact on traditional French critical production has been minimal. Similarly, the impact of postcolonial theory (for example, the work of Fanon and Césaire – both Martiniquais and thus French colonial subjects, and Edward Saïd, translated into French in 1980 with a preface by Tzvetan Todorov) on the French academic world remains much more measured than in the Anglophone world. Indeed, any map of the sphere of influence and practice of cultural and postcolonial studies could hardly be made to include France.

any future for a new sort of comparative field; similarly the relationship of time to space, and the often simplistic paradigms with which we attempt to conceptualize and imagine the temporal-spatial conjunctures, demand to be re-thought. No question we may “choose” to address can escape this necessity. The function of the temporal in the constitution of parallel-difference must not be ignored, as it often has been in traditional comparative literary and philosophical studies.

If there remains a connexion between the traditional conception of Comparative Literature and global literary studies it would without doubt be the importance given to intertextuality, a relationship between texts that cannot be imagined outside of history. A good example of such historicity, and this is just one of many examples that could be given of the function of the intertext in Asian cultural consumption and production, would be the historical reception of George Gordon Byron (1788-1824). That Byron’s work should have its place in Anglo-Greek comparative literary history, that the English aristocrat should still be a mythic figure in the Greek national imaginary, is comprehensible to the European reader. But why should Byron be lauded by the Chinese reader ?

At first sight the Chinese attraction to Byron seems misplaced, even perverse. The Chinese, and similarly the Japanese, fascination with the Other’s literary practice was real enough. But Asian interest in European textual practice, which developed in the mid to late nineteenth century, did not centre on English-language poetic production, so closely associated in the radical intellectual’s mind with European colonialism. Rather, the object of poetic desire was for the most part with French free verse.

While in Europe and America pre-modern, « classical », Chinese poetry was avidly read and reworked by Anglophone translators and poets - the translations of Arthur Waley (1889-1969) and Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) being of a prime importance in the literary construction of a mythic, ancient, exotic and Othered China - in China, the would-be intellectual class sought

to understand foreign modernity; from the end of the nineteenth century novelists such as Dickens, and even more popular writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (as author of Sherlock Holmes) were translated and appreciated for the critical insight into Western industrial world that they offered.

In the domain of poetry, the exponents of China's New Poetry sought a total liberation from the shackles of constraint imposed by the classical Chinese poetic mode. Inventors and practitioners of the New Poetry in the main looked to the emancipatory possibilities of the *vers libre* of nineteenth-century French symbolism, and to the revolutionary passion of Mayakovsky (1893-1930) and Esenin (1895 - 1925). Unlike most of their contemporaries two major poetic figures of the first half of the twentieth century (what is often called the Republican period), Xu Zhimo (1896 –1931) and Wen Yiduo (1899-1946) were attracted to the more ordered and orderly romanticism of nineteenth-century English verse.

But, Byron figured only belatedly in the pantheon of Xu Zhimo's poetic models, the Chinese poet only translating his English predecessor's *Corsair* (1814) in 1924.<sup>2</sup> But already, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Byron was considered in China to be not only a poetic reference, but a great man, a hero. We know that the Greeks have greatly admired him for the support, more effectual on the moral rather than military plane, that he lent to their struggle for sovereignty. Upon the news of his demise the Greeks declared a three-week period of national mourning for this peer of the British realm who had clearly pushed to the fore in his poems and in his speeches his disgust with the policies of his own country from which since his youth he had continuously sought to distance himself. But why should the Chinese so many decades later, discover a hero in the person of Lord Byron, who had never set foot outside of Europe and had never consecrated a single line to China ?

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<sup>2</sup> *Xiaoshuo yuebao*, 15:4.

The answer lies in the history of the nineteenth century, and more particularly in the history of imperialism, and the nationalist, anti-colonialist reaction to it. Greece had long been subjected to rule by a foreign dynastic empire, and China's last dynasty, the Qing, that of the Manchus, had imposed its rule by force. Greece, was perceived by Chinese intellectuals as resembling China in that it was the successor to an ancient civilization that had been subjugated to foreign domination and was now confronting the challenge of Western modernity. Furthermore, that Byron had supported the Greeks in their struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire could not fail to impress and inspire the Chinese reformers. China was threatened and invaded by foreigners, in particular by the British, and that a son of the British ruling class should support those who had resisted colonialist oppression could not but be appreciated by an intellectual class in search of an alternative modernity with a more human and humane face.

But the reason for Byron's enthusiastic reception in a China faced with the high tide of British imperialist ambition, is perhaps yet more complex than a straightforward approval of Byron's alliance with Greek independantists, of his defence of the marginalized, colonized subject. Two nineteenth-century events connected by the role of one British ruling family, yet separated in space and time by six decades and a whole continent, are both well-known to millions of Chinese readers; yet only one of these is embedded in Greek national consciousness. The first event dates back to 26 December 1801. I refer to the beginning of the dismantling of the Parthenon Marbles by Thomas Bruce, Seventh Earl of Elgin (1766-1841). Elgin would attempt to justify the pillage by opining that both Turks and Greeks were indifferent to the conservation of the monument and that marbles would be put to better use as a source of inspiration for English artists in London. Despite years of Greek campaigning, what became known as the "Elgin marbles" still langour there in the custody of the British Museum. It is a well-known story of

brazen colonialist disdain for the modern “Oriental” Other deemed incapable of comprehending or demonstrating concern for past cultural traditions and objects.

The second event took place sixty years later, when another Elgin, James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin (1811—1863), the son of he who had purloined the Parthenon, in order to punish the Manchu court for its refusal to allow Western embassies access to the capital, ordered British and French forces to sack the imperial summer palace, the Yuanmingyuan, in Beijing; an act of vandalism famously condemned by Victor Hugo who wrote of “one theft with two thieves”. The 23,000 sculptures and relics surviving the pillage of Anglo-French rank and file soldiers are also now located in London’s British Museum. But the sacking was but a spectacular sideshow, an adjunct to the main objective which was to impose European economic and political hegemony, and to occupy whatever territory necessary in order so to do. In 1860, at the conclusion of this “Second Opium War”, a war to assure continued, unimpeded British importation of opium into China, Britain obtained Kowloon opposite Hong Kong Island (already acquired in 1842). In 1898 the so-called New Territories, contiguous to Kowloon, were obtained on a ninety-nine year lease. This fifty-fold increase in the size of Britain’s foothold in China was a small affair for the world’s largest and most powerful imperialist giant, but it constituted a further chapter in the story of China’s humiliation. Three years later, in 1902, with the fall of China’s last imperial dynasty still a decade away, the great reformer and scholar Liang Qichao, who saw nineteenth-century European novels as a force for socio-political reform and encouraged their emulation, translated segments of two major poems of Byron, *Childe Harold* (1811) and *Don Juan*, for inclusion in his grand, yet unfinished, futuristic, utopian novel *Xin Zhongguo weilaiji* (The story of the future of New China) in which he imagined the China of 1962. One of the fragments translated was the now familiar excerpt from the second canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* :

Dull is the eye that will not weep to see  
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed  
By British hands, which it had best behoved  
To guard those relics ne'er to be restored.  
Curst be the hour when from their isle they roved,  
And once again thy hapless bosom gored,  
And snatch'd thy shrinking gods to northern climes abhorred!  
(Byron 197)

Other translations rapidly followed. In 1905, Ma Junwu (1881-1940) and Huang Kan (1886 — 1935) independently translated into Chinese the “Isles of Greece” section of the third canto of *Don Juan* as “Ode to Greece”. It is in the latter that is found the plaint of Byron in favour of the Greeks, and their heritage:

To feel at least a patriot's shame  
Even as I sing, suffuse my face ;  
For what is left the poet here ?  
For Greeks a blush, for Greece a tear.  
(Byron 695)

Clearly the Chinese translators chose those passages that foregrounded the struggle for national autonomy, the renaissance of a country once grandiose and glorious, and the shame of the (British) poet in the face of his compatriots' actions. For the Chinese reader of the early twentieth century, and in objective historical terms, the words penned by Byron had become even heavier with meaning. British imperialism had entered a new expansionist and territorialist phase and its ideological disdain for the Other, especially the Other of colour, knew few bounds. The China that had had little to fear from British marauders at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Elgin chose to desecrate the Parthenon, a century later when Byron's words were translated, was now weak and fragmented into ‘spheres of influence’ controlled from the colony-enclaves of the European powers, and had escaped full-scale territorial colonization only because Britain wished to maintain hegemonic power in China, a dominance that would have been

rendered difficult by a cartographic division of the Manchu Empire into physical foreign ‘possessions’.

In 1906 and 1908, the celebrated literati and translator Su Manshu (1884-1918 ) published two volumes of translations containing versions of Byron’s poems (Hu 134). There then followed commentaries on the poems. One such was written by a man who would become modern China’s great mythic author and revolutionary figure, Lu Xun (1881-1936). Writing in 1907 out of a poetic tradition that spanned more than two millennia, Lu Xun declared Byron’s poetry was infused with the “ power of enormous waves crashing down directly on the columns of the old society” (Lu 1907). In other words, Lu Xun apprehended a poetry of critique interrogative of empires and feudal systems. Byron’s poetry spoke clearly to a young élite Chinese generation which sought the fall of the Manchu empire, the restitution of China’s autonomy, and the disappearance of foreign occupying powers. Lu Xun resumed his sentiment thus: “His words resound with resistance” (Lu 1907).

Another major intellectual figure, Liang Shiqiu (1902-1987), spoke of Byron’s style as a “poetic revolution”. In 1914, Hu Shi (1891-1962) , scholar, pedagogue, diplomat and pioneer of China’s New Poetry movement published his translation of “Ode to Greece” (Hu 150-165). Hu, more reformer than revolutionary, noted Byron’s relatively mediocre literary stature in the eyes of his compatriots, and identifying the reason for his renown in his political stance: “Although Byron may be placed in the second water of England’s literature, his political reputation abroad far surpasses that of other English poets” (Hu 136). Shelley had yet to be translated in China but would soon join Byron in the Chinese revolutionary intellectual imaginary, especially after the launching of the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1919 intellectual revolution, a literary and cultural reaction to the marginalization of China in the Versailles peace talks.<sup>3</sup> The revolutionary cultural fervour that

<sup>3</sup> China an ally of Britain and France had sent men to Europe during World War One. They were incorporated into the British Army’s Chinese Labour Corps ; it was they who dug the trenches in France. China thus hoped to, at least,



followed this post-Great War reminder of China's subaltern status, drew the young intellectual elite even closer to Byron. Lu Xun, decades after having first written of Byron, attempting to explain Chinese admiration for the poet, stated clearly that "it was his support for Greek independence. With the decline of the Qing [Manchu] empire, a section of China's youth, full of the ideas of revolution, revenge and resistance found their inspiration in the poetry of Byron" (Lu 1926). After the rise to national power of the Communists in 1949, New China continued to render homage to Byron. This admiration was formulated within a national, revolutionary imaginary, yet it demanded an assemblage of layers of acquaintance with Greek history and culture, ancient and modern, of knowledge of the politico-historical role of Byron, the aristocratic youth who dared to denounce British imperialism and its hooligan manners, a parallel reading of British intrusions into Greece and in China, and finally a desire to emulate in both writing and action this poet *resistant* who succeeded in motivating a generation and a class distanced from Byron in time and in space, but drawn close to him by a long moment of history - perpetuated by British imperialism and the anti-colonialist reaction – and a common yearning for autonomy.

Today such autonomy seems imperilled by the advance of the global. Globalization as an economic tendency, as a political strategy, as a dominant ideology, as a discourse of hypermodernity, as the bogeyman of the globophobic, is now firmly entrenched in our imaginaries as the inescapably seductive driving force of the twenty-first century. But is this process of international economic, and thus cultural, harmonization, standardization and homogenisation so modern?

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have sovereignty restored over its German occupied territories (such as Qingdao – Tsingtao), but these were transferred to Japan, also an ally. Students demonstrated at Tiananmen. The demonstration was violently suppressed by the authorities. A list of names of English officers of the Chinese Labour Corps, together with the medals they were attributed, may be found on the website of the Public Record Office. There is no Chinese name listed.

The discourse of globalization, in reality, has been recuperated from already existent analyses of processes of internationalisation and homogenisation, it has been *détourné*, as the French has it. The verb *détourner* is difficult to translate into English (“hijack” is quite close, “divert” too neutral). Indeed, a “hijack” in French is a *détournement*, and Guy Debord and the Situationists advocated just such a “hijacking” of texts and language. More recently, politicians and marketing strategists have *détourné* the concept of globalization. And yet even *their* recuperated sense of globalization is not so distant from a much more well-established vision of this process. But since when have we been theorizing globalization? Let us examine the following text:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country....it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, ... industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands....In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

The words just cited were written over a century and half ago. They are taken from the *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848 (Marx 83-84). It is not immediately evident whether Marx and Engels consider this march towards a global economy and culture as positive, but the sense of the words that follow is quite clear:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all ... nations into civilisation....It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls

civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image (Marx 84).

Already over 150 years ago Marx saw economic globalization as an inevitable process, but did he foresee the (post-modern) commodification of intellectual and cultural production? Even if Marx understood the logic of capitalism, which evidently he did better than anyone, he could not predict the emergence of a post-bourgeois capitalist economy and the concomitant hypermodern economic colonization of culture and language.

For Marx and Engels, true internationalists, at least in a white Euro-American dimension, who transposed and introduced ideas and lexical innovations from one European language to another, the internationalization of the work and product of the intellectual could only be beneficial to progressive forces.

They were right in foreseeing and predicting economic and intellectual globalization, but since the transformation in power relations expected by Marx and Engels did not happen, or did not happen as they expected, the globalization of intellectual, cultural and informational production and distribution has now fallen totally under the hegemony of the economic.

Nevertheless, the representational strategy of regnant authority identified by Marx and Engels remains fundamentally similar. The national bourgeois economy may have been replaced by networks of global economic power, but the “new” form of power still deploys the same *modus operandi*: “it creates a world in its own image” (Marx 84).

But let us not be mistaken, Marx did not condemn economic or intellectual “cosmopolitanization”, as he called it. The world needed to be pulled out of its feudal misery, the town must replace the country, Nature must be mastered. While not categorically hostile to the local, Marx and Engels did not regret its demise, since the new global hegemony of the proletariat had first to traverse the historical phase of the centralizing nation-state.

As often with Marx and Engels, their discourse is contradictory, or at least now it so seems at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for they are at once critical of the brutality of the bourgeoisie, and yet in awe of the progress inherent in the advance of bourgeois national and international capitalist modernization. Let me cite one last paragraph from the *Communist Manifesto*, a text that oozes disdain for the marginal and the unmodern and which contains a famously disparaging dismissal of the peasant way of life. It is also a text that shows the acute analytical prowess of Marx in its prediction of the twentieth century economic, but also cultural, balance of power:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West (Marx 84).

In this extract from *The Communist Manifesto* we are confronted at once with the full power of Marx's critical capacities and at the same time with an engrained Hegelian disdain for the assumed backwardness and decadence of the "Orient". Here, Marx, like Hegel, establishes an equivalence between what is termed "rural idiocy", and the presumed ignorance and backwardness of the East. Such historically ill-founded prejudices are still sadly entrenched, a century and half later, in the post-colonial, yet still deeply colonialist, European imaginary of the Other, and above all the Oriental Other.

But while Marx and Engels may have been unable to foresee the evolutive nature of consumer capitalism, post World War II "alternative" theorists such as Cornelius Castoriadis and the even more marginal, although latterly deified, Guy Debord were not only able to theorize and

predict the development of the economic but also the ways in which political power and its representations would evolve.<sup>4</sup>

Guy Debord, in his now celebrated and oft recuperated theory of *société spectaculaire*, “society of the spectacle”, analysed the nature of alienation in twentieth-century modern society.<sup>5</sup> While frequently understood as a critique of the manipulation of the image in modern society, the *Society of the Spectacle* goes well beyond analysing the relatively restrained sphere of the mass media. Debord focuses on the impoverishment of daily lived experience, and the increasing alienation and fragmentation of human existence. The spectacle, the sum of the independent images and representations provided by modernity, then serves as a substitute for real and whole experience of life. Individuals separated from one another in everyday life find unity only in the passive contemplation of the image, modern substitute for religion. Of course, the core problem is not image and representation but the society that has need of them. For Debord there were two types of spectacle in the 1950s, the diffuse, represented by the “liberal democracies” providing the illusion of choice, and the concentrated, constituted by the authoritarian model (the Soviet bloc, China, Indonesia) in which the spectacle is focussed on a quasi-religious leader. Later, in an analysis which foresaw the fall of the wall, *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* published in 1988, Debord located what he called the “integrated spectacle” into which the two systems had started to merge and to recuperate features the one from the other. This “post-communist” phase of the “integrated spectacle” in which in terms of representation the New World Order replaced the Cold war, is what is now represented as globalization.

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<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, radical French theorist of Greek origin, moved gradually, over a period of twenty years starting in the immediate post-World War Two period, from a neo-Trotskyist critique of Soviet bloc communism to a fundamental critique of Marx’s historical determinism. In particular, he ultimately demonstrates that Marx extrapolates to the whole of history ways of thinking that are appropriate and applicable only to Marx’s own historical era, subsumes the diversity of global social forms under a schema making sense only for developed capitalist society. For a good analytical summary of Castoriadis’s work see : Poirier, N. (2004), *Castoriadis : L’imaginaire radical*, Paris : PUF.

<sup>5</sup> But importantly the French word *spectacle* also translates as “show”, as in cabaret or theatre.

But while for Debord, writing between the 1960s and the 1980s, globalization, or what he perceived as the increasing homogenization of the integrated spectacle, constituted the emerging ideological formation of the waning twentieth century, the national-level manifestation of the spectacle with its national consumable politician/pop-idol heroes was still very much present on the ideological stage. And yet, is such an imbrication of the national and the global not in contradiction with the national's supposed contestation of global hegemonic power?

I think not. Despite all the "faith" invested in the liberating impulse and potential of national revolutions, has not the national hemmed us in to a lower order totalization, a sort of sub-globalization of culture in both its aesthetic and wider senses? While modern national cultures, invented and reinvented in and around nationalizing projects like modern Greece's and modern China's, were constructed and imagined in opposition to a process that for much of the twentieth century was known, not as globalization, but as cultural imperialism, national cultures themselves were already standardizing constructs applying unifying cultural practices, and eliminating linguistic and other diversities. In other words, the national literatures that we have for decades compared in conventional comparative literature departments were already totalizing entities whose consequence, if not always their objective, was to binarize and thus minimize, and often altogether eradicate, the very differences comparatism ought to seek to foreground and value.

If, even in the era of the global, the national continues to exist it is because national projects have not yet run their course as Marx envisaged they would and that the hour of "world literature" has not arrived. The national continues to prosper on the territory of global commerce in the sense that because the unifying force of distribution and consumption serves a local purpose, it has become the great leveller, the grand homogenizer of national space. What matters is not what is consumed but the pattern of homogenised consumption, what matters is that what is

consumed is consumed nationally, for instance, all over China – or for the moment all over modernized China. For local holders of power this is the global at the service of the national. The standardisation of distribution and consumption advances and completes the project of national cultural assimilation, a project launched much later in Asia than in Europe. So that, ultimately, this is why Starbucks is in Beijing's Forbidden City and McDonalds in every town worth the name in China. McDonaldization is the final phase, the accomplishment, of nationalization in the ex-Third World, and glocalization, what we can also term Asterixisation (promoting American burgers with French cartoon characters), renders this process even more recuperable to the national project. Thus, the tentacles of a nineteenth-century process of modernization and nation-state building reaching down into contemporary hypermodern globality.

Marx envisaged the generalization of a nineteenth-century bourgeois culture which is what in part took place. But that has now been overtaken by the technologies and practices of mass spectacular consumption. Moreover, we are far removed from any sort of utopian exchange of literary and cultural diversities. The cultural is embedded in the economic and must obey its "laws". Was China's acceptance into the world economic system achieved by integrating the World Trade Organisation, or by Disney's producing *Mulan*<sup>TM</sup>; a fourteen-hundred year old Chinese tale which became an American registered trademark?

Given white America's history of distrust and even hatred of the Chinese, why at the end of the twentieth-century did Disney-America choose to make their "Chinese" cartoon film? Is it simply, as Byrne and McQuillan claim, that Disney in making this film wished primarily to please the Chinese authorities so as to benefit from the vast potential of a market soon to open its doors wide to the World Trade Organisation (163-165). And why did Disney choose to re-tell this story (of a dutiful daughter who secretly takes her father's place in the imperial Chinese army so as to defend the state from the invading foreigners)? After all the plot, until Disney had nuanced

it, was not a typical Disney historico-mythic love story. The original Chinese tale, or ballad, which first circulated around fifteen hundred years ago and was retold in many forms (lyric, theatrical and narrative) over the subsequent centuries, stressed the lack of importance of gender as long as the task in hand was accomplished:

For twelve years the warriors had campaigned together  
None suspected that Mulan was a woman  
The male rabbit jumps, and the female blinks  
When they run side by side  
How can you tell which is which? <sup>6</sup>

But Disney's redeployed and recuperated Mulan, was easily assimilated into a Euro-American tradition that still venerated Joan of Arc, and yet now sought glocalized models for late twentieth-century American "multiculturalism". However, Disney's admittance of Chineseness into its cartoon stable forgets the long struggle of Chinese and Japanese Americans for recognition of their mistreatment at the hands of the US state and American society in general. That struggle for recognition started in 1960s and 1970s anti-Vietnam war Asian American alliances and led to the formation of an Asian American consciousness. The movement also led directly to the creation of university departments of Asian American studies established initially by writers and activists such as Shawn Wong and Lawson Inada and now largely, "professionalized" and occupied by "qualified" academics. The Disney representation of Americanized Chineseness, then, elides the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century legal exclusion of Chinese from immigration and American citizenship; the internment camps in which Japanese immigrants and American citizens of Japanese origin were indiscriminately imprisoned in the deserts of the American West during the Second World War after Pearl Harbour; and more recently the racism of the 1980s when the anger of US workers and their failing automobile industry was vented on unsuspecting Asian

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<sup>6</sup> My translation of the last lines of *Mulan* (The Ballad of Mulan). The Chinese text is consultable on-line at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~dporter/sampler/huamulan.html>



Americans. The importance of history to the reading of texts and intertexts, as I stressed at the beginning of this article, is nowhere more necessary than here. But if modern *American* history is suppressed, the representation of *Chinese* history in this film once more reinscribes Orientalist and Area Studies practices of conflating all the “pre-modern” into a monolithic moment of antiquity: in *Mulan*, pre-modern China becomes a seamless, static, ahistorical entity.

But again, if *Mulan* integrated easily, into the transnational cinema conglomerate’s global and globalizing strategy, alongside Jasmine, Snow White and the other Princesses of the Disney empire, it in no way offended official Chinese sensibilities, no more than it did the Chinese social imaginary. The neo-Confucian values that have been resurfacing in post-Mao China could only be comforted by *Mulan*’s return to the parental home and her marriage to the main male character, “the reimposition of the patriarchal order at the end of the Disney film” serving “to undo the liberating potential of its central female character” (Byrne 165). Or, as Disney’s own webpage has it, the film “celebrates honor, courage, and the importance of family”.<sup>7</sup>

But globality, the time-space that all of us today inhabit, is not the bright uniformly coloured world with which cartoons, and globalization’s propaganda in general, presents us. The spectacle is stained and blotched with the inequalities and injustices of populations left behind, left out, left struggling underneath, lost in the folds of the dimensional computer-generated models and mind maps, and in the parentheses of post-modern academic discourse; sterilized and sanitized in the hegemony of the Greek suffixes that have reproduced themselves so intrusively in this article. The excluded are hidden in the caves, and under the crags, of the cliff-faces of a thousand plateaux, metaphorically yet literally, bookishly yet cynically, written into the margins of our discursive strategies.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://disneyvideos.disney.go.com/moviefinder/products/2296303.html>

And these dispossessed are not only the hundreds of millions of citizens of the BRICs, and the not yet BRICs, who have yet to benefit from any form of modern life, but also the host of forgotten post-colonized in our midst.<sup>8</sup> The north African women who clean up after us after *we* lock our office doors at day's end and leave behind the subalterns in the pages of our cultural studies manuals. As academics we stand scientifically, neutrally, helplessly on the sidelines of a world dominated by the market, analysing and at times even critiquing the New World Order, only to find our words subverted and recuperated by business and business-ologists. At worst we are ourselves turned into the mediators, the passers of socio-economic conflict that goes veiled in the grab of the so-called cultural. But as women and men of letters we should be capable of going beyond critique of the global, the local and the glocal, we should be capable of challenging the linguistic order within which we are all trapped, of contributing to a new poetics of a new world culture which - as that bearded white male bourgeois radical, Karl Marx - predicted, will inevitably come. But will that culture be no more than the globalized/glocalized homogenous product? Will our heroes be borrowed and shared, or will they be recuperated, marketed and sold? And will humankind be yet capable of turning and twisting the shabby soullessness of hypermodernity into a new poetry of everyday life?

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<sup>8</sup> BRICs : emergent economies typified by Brazil, Russia, India and China.

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